

Apple App Review

Heidi Cleveland

Meredith College

### **Overview of the App**

- App Title: Phonics Vowels
- App Publisher/Developer: AbiTalk
- Version: 1.07 (Free)
- Link to App Store: <http://itunes.apple.com/us/app/phonics-vowels-short-vowels/id453633094?mt=8>

## Curriculum Compliance

- **Yes/No** – Is it relevant to the curriculum framework?

The app is relevant to the following elements of the *North Carolina Common Core State Standards*:

### **Kindergarten Phonics and Word Recognition**

**K.RFS.3.2** Associate the long and short sounds with the common spellings (graphemes) for the five major vowels.

**K.RFS.3.4** Distinguish between similarly spelled words by identifying the sounds of the letters that differ.

### **First Grade Phonological Awareness**

**1.RFS.2** Demonstrate understanding of spoken words, syllables, and sounds (phonemes).

**1.RFS.2.1** Distinguish long from short vowel sounds in spoken single-syllable words.

**1.RFS.2.2** Orally produce single-syllable words by blending sounds (phonemes) including consonant blends.

**1.RFS.2.4** Segment spoken single-syllable words into their complete sequence of individual sounds (phonemes).

### **First Grade Phonics and Word Recognition**

**1.RFS.3** Know and apply grade-level phonics and word analysis skills in decoding words.

**1.RFS.3.2** Decode regularly spelled one-syllable words.

**Second Grade Phonics and Word Recognition**

**2.RFS.3** Know and apply grade-level phonics and word analysis skills in decoding words.

**2.RFS.3.1** Distinguish long and short vowels when reading regularly spelled one-syllable words.

**2.RFS.3.2** Know spelling-sound correspondences for additional common vowel teams (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2010).

- Please add any additional comment regarding implementation:

The free version of this app practices words with a and e sounds. The full version of the app may be purchased for \$2.99.

**Operational**

1. **Yes/No** – Is navigation easy? For example, index, contents, menus, clear icons

This app is relatively easy to navigate, but could be improved with a few changes. Only eight accounts appear on the initial screen, making it difficult for the rest to scroll to their name. In addition, Teachers must demonstrate that letters on the left side of the screen fit in the first space, and letters on the right side of the screen fit in the second space. Currently, if a student drags the correct letter from the opposite side, it bounces back as if it is incorrect. This is confusing to the students, and should be corrected in future versions.

2. ~~Yes~~/No – Is on-screen help and/or tutorial available?

The students may access hints by touching the “hint” button or the picture of a girl holding a flower. There is no tutorial or help for adults, but the program itself is generally easy to navigate.

3. ~~Yes~~/No – Does it have multiple ability levels?

The app appeals to students with different skill levels, but does not allow for customization. It does not allow a teacher or parent to disable the hint function. Users with iOS 6 could disable the buttons using the accessibility settings in the operating system, but the developers should provide this option within the app.

4. ~~Yes~~/No – How does it respond to errors? For example, incorrect spelling.

The app does not allow the incorrect letter to stay in place. There is no limit on the number of attempts to place incorrect letters.

5. ~~Yes~~/No – Are there audio/video options with controls?

The only option would be to lower the volume, or turn off the sound using the iPad’s normal volume control.

6. ~~Yes~~/No – Can selected material be tagged, copied, pasted, saved, and printed?

It would be helpful if a teacher could print an overview of each student’s progress.

7. ~~No~~ **Yes** – Does it keep a history of the user’s work over a period of time?

The app keeps a record of each lesson that is fully or partially completed. It does not record accuracy, time or date.

8. ~~Yes~~ **No** – Features that address special needs? E.g. physical, aural, visual, ESL.

The app does not include word equivalents in other languages, and has no options to change features. A teacher could use the iPad’s built-in universal access features to address some special needs, but those are available for all apps.

9. ~~Yes~~ **No** – What support materials are included? For example, online resources, booklet, lesson plans, student worksheets?

No support material is provided, and documentation is minimal. Links labeled “support” direct the user to a page with a listing of all the developer’s apps, but they only link to the app store for purchase. Users must sort through a blog to find information relevant to the program they are using.

## **Pedagogy**

1. ~~No~~ **Yes** – Does the material accommodate diverse ways in which students learn?

The app engages both visual and auditory learners by associating pictures and letters with sounds. Learners who dislike repetition will enjoy using this app to practice letter recognition and spelling. Kinesthetic learners would be more motivated by other apps that use the iPad’s internal gyroscope and accelerometer to detect movement of the device and

manipulate objects in the program. At this time, *Phonics Vowels* does not provide that function.

2. **Yes**/~~No~~ – Is it developmentally and age appropriate?

The app did not frustrate a young three-year-old learner, and a fifth grade student was motivated to use it even though the student had mastered the skills practiced in the app. The app is appropriate for students who are just discovering the alphabetic principle because the app does not penalize incorrect answers.

3. **Yes**/~~No~~ – Does it provide an opportunity to increase students' understanding?

By grouping words with a specific vowel pattern (such as consonant-a-consonant or consonant-a-consonant-e) the student can become familiar with generalities that help them determine the correct vowel sound. They are only hearing the vowel patterns modeled for them because they only select and move consonants.

4. ~~Yes~~/**No** – Does it provide an opportunity for higher order thinking?

This app practices a skill by asking students to remember letter sounds, and showing them how sounds combine to form a predetermined word. It does not ask the students to use higher order skills by creating, analyzing, or evaluating.

5. **Yes**/~~No~~ – Does it provide an opportunity for engagement and interaction?

Students are actively engaged in spelling words and using letter sounds. The program gives feedback to the students by not allowing incorrect letters to fit into the word, and by

giving positive affirmation to students when a word is completed. They can watch as the word is spelled for them, but they also practice spelling by selecting letters by themselves.

6. **Yes**/~~No~~ – Does it provide opportunity for collaborative practice & idea sharing?

The program can be used in small group settings where students can show each other their work, and ask questions of peers. It can be used in combination with a mini lesson or adult coaching.

7. ~~Yes~~/**No** – Does it promote creativity and imagination?

Students can play with an interactive graphic, but this is only in the context of a reward. The central purpose of the program is to practice conventional spelling and learn letter sounds. It does not allow students to create with letters or invent their own words. The *Word Wizard* (L'Escapadou, 2012) iPad movable alphabet allows users flexibility to create their own nonsense words.

8. ~~Yes~~/**No** – Does provide an opportunity for problem solving?

If a letter does not fit, the student does not have to discover why. Students are only choosing one of four letters. There is no need for problem solving beyond trying a different letter.

9. **Yes**/~~No~~ – Does it provide feedback and assessment?

The program provides feedback for each letter placement. Correct letters fit into the word, incorrect letters snap back into place. Completed words are affirmed with a graphic

and verbal affirmation. Adding diverse affirmations rather than repeating the same phrase would improve the program. Adding a report of frequently missed letters would help teachers modify their instruction to address student needs.

### **iPad App Evaluation Guiding Questions- Education Apps**

#### **For what age group(s) is the application appropriate?**

*Phonics Vowels* is appropriate for developing phonemic awareness with children age 3-8, depending on the context. Younger children using this app will need adult support, and should only use the app if they show interest. A three-year-old child experienced difficulty moving the letters at first, but was able to do so with practice and adult coaching. He smiled when he discovered he could press letters to make sounds. He did not seem to understand why some letters bounced back and some letters stayed in the word. Instead of becoming frustrated, he asked to play the game again. Older children can use this game for independent practice once they have been introduced to the app.

#### **How would a teacher incorporate the application into the classroom?**

A teacher could present a mini-lesson about a specific vowel sound, then use the app as an opportunity for students to practice making words with that sound. The app could also be used at an iPad station in learning centers.

#### **Does this app allow you to do something you were unable to do in the past?**

Self-correcting puzzles allow for phonics practice, but they do not provide instant



accurate association with pronounced letter sounds and words. Phonics apps like *Phonics Vowels* allow English language learners to practice letter sounds without being dependent on pictures for sound keywords. Using a traditional puzzle, a Spanish-speaking student will match the letter o with a picture of an orange. But the child knows the picture as “la naranja”, which has no o sound.

This app uses the hint feature and a summary of each word to show how separate sounds blend together to form a word. Students see the letters highlighted as a speaker says the word in real time. Students can explore the letter sounds independently, without a helper to reinforce pronunciation.

### **Does the app address more than one learning style (visual, auditory, kinesthetic)?**

The app allows for visual learners to see letters and pictures. Auditory learners will hear the letters and words pronounced. This app does not use iPad’s internal gyroscope and accelerometer for input. *Motion Math HD* (Motion Math, 2012) uses this technology so that kinesthetic learners may tilt and move the iPad to control the game. Teachers should search for phonics apps that use this model to engage their kinesthetic learners.

### **Can more than one user account be set up?**

I was able to set up more than 23 separate accounts, allowing users to recall their progress and identify lessons that have been completed.

**Does the app allow for progress monitoring of multiple users?**

Teachers and parents can look at individual accounts to see which units were attempted or completed. There is no indication of how many times a student tried the incorrect letter, or how much time was required to complete the lesson.

**Can student data be sent to the teacher or parent via email?**

No, student data cannot be sent via email. Most iPads used by young children in a classroom setting should have the email function disabled.

**How much instruction will need to be provided on use of the app?**

Once students are in their account, they require only minimal instruction to navigate the program. Navigating to their account from the start screen is a bit more complex if more than 6 users are registered. In that case, the students will need to scroll to names off screen. In the process of scrolling, some students may accidentally press the icon for the wrong account.

Instructors need to show students that letters from the left side fit in the left space, and letters from the right fit in the right space. Instructors will also want to show students that pressing the dinosaur picture with the red circle and slash will keep the dinosaur from making a screeching sound after each word. This reviewer observed several users of the program turning off the sound to avoid the noise, defeating a primary benefit of the program.

**Will the app meet the needs of all students in the class or will it be used with a specific subgroup?**

The majority of kindergarten and first grade students will benefit from using this app. Those beginning to develop phonemic awareness will practice connecting letters to the sounds they represent. Students with more experience will practice spelling and learn the different vowel spelling patterns. This app could help second grade students who need additional activities to practice decoding and spelling.

**Does the app provide enough positive reinforcement to hold the interest of the students?**

Students are motivated to continue with the program because they like to earn dinosaur badges. A kindergarten class was excited about the app, and their teacher asked to use it in her classroom again. A fifth grade student who has mastered these skills asked for her own account, because she enjoyed collecting the dinosaurs. Each dinosaur makes a colorful animated trail when moved on the award screen.

**Evaluation Rubric for all iPod Apps (Walker, 2010)****Curriculum Connection**

5. “Skill(s) reinforced are strongly connected to the targeted skill or concept” (Walker, 2010).

The app is designed to teach phonics, and it does allow students to press letters and hear their sounds. It also shows students how letter sounds blend to form a word. The hint feature models segmenting words. The title may be a bit misleading, because students directly manipulate consonants, not vowels. The connection is still strong, because students hear the vowel sounds and see the letters that make them.

**Authenticity**

2. “Skills are practiced in a contrived game/simulation format” (Walker, 2010).

This app does not allow learners to decode words in the context of books or sentences. But Madda, Griffo, Pearson, and Raphael (2011) note, “... if authenticity were pursued too single-mindedly, some useful skills might never be acquired” (p.45). This app can be an important part of literacy instruction if teachers also devote time to applying phonics skills as students read authentic text and write for genuine purposes.

**Feedback**

3. “Feedback is specific and results in improved student performance (may include tutorial aids)” (Walker, 2010).

This app goes beyond simply offering the student a chance to try again. The hint feature

demonstrates the correct letters, and incorrect letters still produce their sounds when touched.

The app does not report specific data to the teacher or parents.

### **Differentiation**

2. “App offers limited flexibility (e.g., few levels such as easy, medium, hard)” (Walker, 2010).

The app appeals to different abilities. It can be made harder by turning off the sound, or by disabling the hint feature through the accessibility settings in the current operating system. But the app itself offers no adjustment for difficulty.

### **User Friendliness**

4. “Students need to have the teacher review how to use the app” (Walker, 2010).

Students may not need much review once the app is launched and their account is selected. They will need help launching the app if there are more than eight accounts, because scrolling to names off screen may be too difficult for younger users. The teacher needs to remind students that letters on the left side fit in the left space, and letters on the right side fit in the right space.

### **Student Motivation**

5. “Students are highly motivated to use the app and select it as their first choice from a selection of related choices of apps” (Walker, 2010).

Even students who are younger or more advanced than the intended audience were motivated to play this app.

## References

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